69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

following a crowd. It was about two miles from the town's centre 527
and I passed several pagodas on the way, where carpenters were working by lamplight in preparation for a future festival.

An enclosure had been built round the pagoda in which every 354
kind of light, from hurricane lamps to fluorescent tubes, had been 527
concentrated in an anarchic glare. The pagoda had hired a generator 545
for the occasion. There was no entrance fee, but young ladies with demurely lowered eyes waited just inside to accept donations, in return for which you received a candle, a posy of Japanese lilac and two joss-sticks in a bamboo container. Among the many attractions was a free theatre show, lasting for many hours, indistinguishable, except to an expert, from the theatre of Siam. Actors remained on the stage for what seemed interminable periods, occasionally advancing or retreating a few steps. Meanwhile their babies played happily round their feet, and quite frequently a stage-hand would walk across and interrupt a scene for a few seconds to pump up the pressure in the hurricane lamps.

On a nearby platform the *lap ton* was being danced. Once again 292
it was the major attraction, but as it was still incorrect for Laotian 301
girls to dance in public, religious enterprise had arranged for 535
hostesses to be brought over from Siam, just across the river. The 562
pagoda hired the girls for the three nights and lodged them in a 527
nearby building. It cost a piastre to cavort round the stage for about fifteen minutes with one of them. They were dressed in hideous knee-length frocks, and some seemed to have permanent waves. The backward Laotian girls in their dowdy finery, their silk scarves, their skirts woven at the hem and waist-band with silver and gold thread, and their abundant jewel-decked chignons, could only look on wistfully. As I arrived the organizers were having 403
trouble with the microphone – indispensable adjunct to any social 527
occasion in the new Far East. A young man chanted a soft, nasal melody which could only be heard within the *boun* enclosure itself. But suddenly the electricians were successful with their tinkerings and all Vientiane was flooded with a great, ogrish baying. The

a certain basic licentiousness and is accented by a final sharp cheer; and the singsong in the strict sense which has no great development and to which were applied words, at the whim of the man or woman singing, to celebrate a welcome or any kind of event (1). 533

1. M. Galerne, op. cit. /Courrier musical, 1925/

Here is one of the love songs, "from which springs all the sentimentally exquisite poetry of the Laotian soul":

The moon is rising; come, o my beloved, and speak to us under the rays of the twinkling star;

O flowers, which exhale your pure perfumes at this hour, come and tell me of his good qualities;

O my heart, why do you beat so strong?

I think of my beloved.

Come, come quickly; I am alone under the roof of my house; why do you leave me thus?

I am languishing, my beloved. Come, then, and press this heart which beats so strongly for you and ask it for the essence of my thoughts.

Come, come quickly.

/123/ Page 123 is devoted to an illustration: "A khene player." --Translator/ /124/

We must regretfully cut short this rapid excursion into the melodious garden of these people who are instinctively artistic and who lost the joy of living together with their independence through the fault of their leaders' tearing one another to pieces, and also because there cannot for long be any place here below for individuals, as well as for peoples, whom the Germans themselves, although they are nevertheless deeply musical, have scornfully called "mandolin players" (1).

1. The Laotian theater scarcely deserves mention. It derives exclusively from the Cambodian and Siamese theater and is likewise made up of extremely long plays -- epics, warrior legends and romances, and religious tales taken from the Vedas, the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. "To this repertoire are joined the purely Kmer plays and various adaptations of Burmese origin, which are played in classical costumes and in which a good bit of comedy and modernism 545 /177/

545 /177/ and a barb of satire are mingled with the ancient traditions." (L. de Reinach, op. cit. /Le Laos, posthumous edition, Paris, 1911/, p. 191.)

341 346 172 /177/ The other arts: architecture. Carefree artists: this is what the Laotians seem to have been throughout the ages. And this is what explains the extreme fragility of the innumerable monuments with which they adorned their land and which the pitiless tropical vegetation is today strangling for the most part. Under the Kmer influence in the south and the Burmese in /125/ the north they built temples, chapels, pagoda-libraries, and reliquaries in the shape of "lotus blossoms" or pyramids or cones which were without any originality of their own but almost always charming in the grace, prettiness and elegance of their details. The reigning princes, from Fa-Ngoun to Souligna, were all great builders of temples, but if we except three or four edifices in Luang-Prabang, a few pagodas and chapels, the That-Luong in Vientiane and the Vat Sisaket which is only a century old, practically nothing is left of this abundant flowering (1).

1. There can be no question here of the important monastery of Vat-Phou (Bassac), which is really Kmer and belongs in some way to the Angkor group.

Everywhere in Laos one encounters impressive ruins of brick pagodas which were clumsily built but in which the plaster which covered them still frames the openings with many-colored ornaments and exquisite arabesques. For several years the French have tried, albeit somewhat tardily, to save the chief of these mutilated vestiges of an Edenic past from total destruction. Even the Vat Prakeo itself is today, alas! irrevocably destined to final disintegration.

"More fragile still (was) the style of building /126/ in wood which may well have yielded the most beautiful of the country's achievements. One of the most interesting of these exists today only in the memory which was recorded by a drawing of Delaporte at the time of the expedition of Doudart de Lagree... This was a pagoda located in the vicinity of Luang-Prabang... its form was highly individual, and reminds one of a feeding trough or a bread-pan. Delaporte compares it to an Oriental tomb. Rectangular in shape, its walls flared out up to the first roof. The latter was surmounted by a second recessed story which flared out again to support a second richly ornamented roof..."